Dogs, Wolves, Grains and Raw meat

Am I feeding my pet the right diet?

It's a good question that may pet owners have asked themselves, but can be a very difficult question to answer as there is a lot of conflicting information out there and some very passionate opinions on what is "right".

There are 3 common questions we get:

Should I be feeding a raw food diet?
Should I be feeding a grain free diet?
Is dog food enough/right/good for my dog?

Raw food is a common supplement and an increasingly popular single source diet for dogs in Australia and around the world. The logic is raw food is natural, wolves eat it now and dogs are domesticated wolves, it follows a similar logic to the paleo movement in humans however...

Wolves in the wild live on average 6-8 years (dogs 11-13, although heavily breed dependant), they commonly suffer from parasitic infections and disease, they also undergo periods of starvation which can lead to poor immunity and further complications, a truly natural diet is not necessarily the healthiest.

Dogs are not wolves, they have been living with humans for at least the last 20,000 years, in this time they have adapted to our environment, temperaments and our diet. Dogs are physically and behaviourally very different from wolves, with changes to their nervous system, gut, exercise levels and dietary requirements.

There is a big debate around raw vs cooked food diets. There are limited studies and so limited data on the benefits of raw diets, these studies have shown that raw diets have:
Improved digestibility – reducing faecal material and smell
Increased fat content – that can improve skin and hair appearance

Owners have reported improved gastro-intestinal health, better teeth and other benefits, but as yet these benefits have not been duplicated in studies.

Risks:

- Dietary deficiencies: raw diets, both homemade and manufactured, have shown significant deficiencies in multiple studies ranging from severe deficiencies in 60% of homemade raw diets, to 95% of diets lacking 1 essential nutrient and 83.5% were deficient in multiple nutrients.
- Infection: Raw meat carried infectious agents, both bacterial and parasitic. Studies on raw meat diets have shown 100% to be contaminated with bacteria. Of concern are salmonella (20-44%), listeria (12%), clostridia (20%) and e. coli (63%). These numbers reflect human grade meat (44% of raw chicken and 4% raw beef and pork having salmonella), and is the primary reason that we cook our own meat. These bacteria have 2 associated risks;
- Disease, dogs can develop diarrhoea, vomiting, dehydration and in some cases septicaemia when infected with these bacteria.
- Many dogs will not show any symptoms, but can still be infected and shed the bacteria, this provides a risk to human health, these bacteria can infect people. This is particularly important in households with children, or those with immune impairment.
- Bones are common in raw diet to provide minerals and possibly to help teeth, this carries the risks of tooth fractures and foreign bodies (being stuck in the gut).

Cooked Bones?

Bones cannot be given cooked Cooking changes the mineral structure making them prone to shattering into sharp shards, which can both get stuck and perforate (cut) the gut.

Gluten or grain free diets have also become more popular, both in humans, but also in dogs.

Grains are a relatively new addition to human (and animal) diets being domesticated around 11,000 years ago, and so are considered by some to be “unnatural”. There is also a misconception that wolves eat only meat, wolves eat a significant amount of plant material, both directly (berries, grasses) and indirectly (gut contents of prey), direct plant material makes up 3-8% of wild wolf diet.

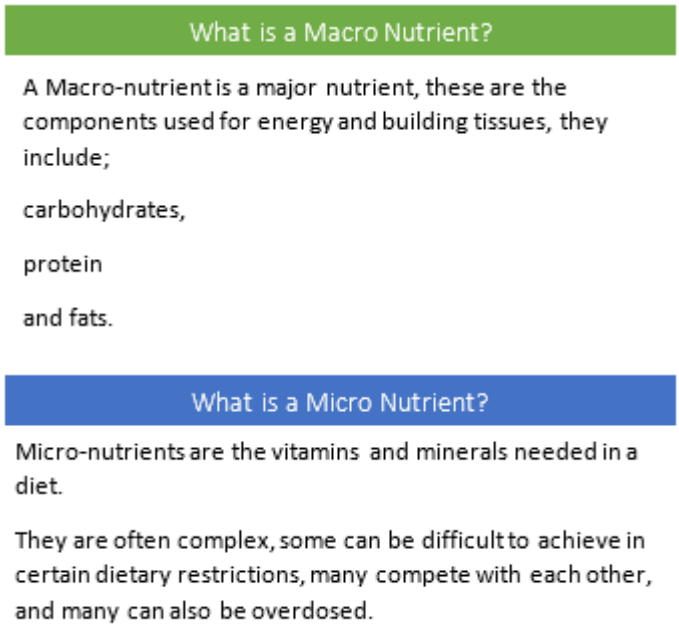
Grain free diet has been taken up with fervour in the United Sates and shown some surprising effects and results. In 2016 there had been a significant increase in a heart disease known as dilated cardio-myopathy in dogs across America that would not normally suffer from this disease.

The common factor has been:
these dogs are on grain free diets; and
have reduced taurine in their blood tests
The reason the grain free diet has caused this disease has not been confirmed, but treatment has resolved around dietary correction and has been successful.

Genetic testing and comparison between dogs and wolves since has shown genetic changes in the brain development, nervous system, and increased amylase production, up to 20 times in dogs compared to wolves. Amylase is an enzyme used to digest the starches found in grains. Part of the domestication process has resulted in dogs that digest grains with more ease, and are possibly dependant on their inclusion.

Bought vs homemade diets have similar issues with raw diets in general, a homemade diet can be used, however formulating one is complicated, often requires day to day variability, is time consuming, expensive and should involve formulation by a veterinary nutrtiontist.

A well-balanced complete diet from a reliable source is enough for a healthy dog to be fed alone, they are designed to meet all the nutritional requirements, macronutrients and micronutrient alike.



“Boredom” with a single source of food is very rarely an issue with dogs, or cats, and having a single source food is not dull or cruel.

We recommend Hills and Royal Canin diets, both companies manufacture both “regular” diets and “prescription” diets.

Due to the specific nutritional requirements of prescription diets they need a high degree of quality control and nutritionist input. They have also produced a significant amount of research into dietary requirements.

Recommendations:

- We recommend a complete balance diet from a trusted manufacturer to be the base of dogs diets.
- We do not recommend raw meat, if used
- Human grade meat only (no “dog meat”)
- Be cautious of infectious risks, to both pets and people
- Be vigilant with keeping up to date with anti-parasite treatment
- Do not use chicken or pork, preference beef, lamb or kangaroo, and ensure lean.
- We do not recommend grain free diets – a newly discovered link between heart disease and grain free diets has been found in dogs.
- If you wish to make a homemade diet we advise you seek a board certified veterinary nutritionist to ensure the diet meets all requirements and no excesses

Good health, Dr Tony